

## **Keeping Family Farmers on the Farm**

**By**

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The American family farmer – or at least his popular image – is an anachronism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The self-sufficient homesteader of the past has been replaced by a scientifically-smart, globally-connected, financially-savvy businessperson.

Technological advances in equipment, plant and animal breeding, soil conservation, land management, and even weather prediction have made it possible to grow more crops and raise more livestock on fewer acres of land. Every advance in the means of agricultural production has made it possible for two percent of the population to feed the rest of us many times over.

As the number of farmers shrinks, we are also witnessing an unprecedented consolidation in the agribusiness industries that serve the few individuals who remain on the farm. Several huge dairy processors control a vast share of the market, forcing milk prices down near the support price. The meat industry continues to consolidate, leaving processing of beef, pork, and poultry in very few hands. Three giant seed dealers dominate the market in corn, soybeans, wheat, and other row crops.

The last time Congress wrote a farm bill, we got it horribly wrong. "Freedom to Farm" traded a real safety net for promises of unlimited growth through expanded trade overseas. The proponents of this policy seemed to forget that markets work in cycles and go down from time to time. As a result, commodity prices have fallen steadily since this policy was enacted.

To make up for this shortfall in the past three years, Congress has approved some \$30 billion in emergency, supplemental, and disaster payments to farmers. If not for this money, average farm income would have fallen far below the average for the 1990s. Even with the supplemental payments, individual farmers are finding it hard to hang on because U.S. farm policy encourages consolidation and concentration.

As Congress prepares to rewrite the farm bill, we need to shift our focus back to the family farmer. We need to enact policies that keep farmers on the farm, that encourage children to stay in agriculture, and that preserve farmland from sprawling development. Some suggestions for improvement include:

- **Farm Programs.** Farm programs must be made truly counter-cyclical, so payments are made when prices fall below a five-year average. Payment formulas must be rewritten to ensure that the money goes to the families who need it most, not to absentee landlords and large corporate interests. In addition, new farm policies must

include high value specialty crops, like fruits and vegetables, which are prevalent in New York and many other areas.

- **Conservation Programs.** The new farm bill must expand conservation programs that recognize the value of soil conservation, wetland preservation, habitat maintenance, and best management practices to the environment. It is not easy or cheap to develop and implement a comprehensive conservation plan, and we should be willing to help share those costs and to provide technical assistance.
- **Rural Development.** It is absolutely essential that the farm bill address the development needs of rural America. It's not just the farm economy that's hurting; it's the entire rural economy. The Northeast, for example, has an abundance of aging infrastructure that is in dire need of repair or replacement. Until Congress places a real priority on these issues, the rural economy will continue to lag behind the cities and suburbs.
- **Research and Extension.** Agricultural research and extension programs provide a critical source of information for farmers. Across the country, land grant institutions are doing cutting edge research on crop production, pesticide alternatives, disease eradication, and agricultural marketing. A nationwide network of extension agents makes sure that producers benefit from this research. Research, education, and extension are the keys to the future of American agriculture, and they must be included in the farm bill.

Freedom to Farm was a travesty for family farmers. A new farm bill won't do much for those who have gone under during the past five years, but it will give us a chance to help the people who are left in business. If we do not take this opportunity to enact sensible policies that are directed at family farmers, we won't have much to debate the next time we go through this process.